

# **Committee on Resources**

## **Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands**

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### **Witness Statement**

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Testimony of: Allan Muth, Ph.D.  
Chairman  
Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy  
Presented to: Committee on Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands  
U. S. House of Representatives  
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The Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy is a state agency whose mission includes the protection of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains. The mountains provide the dramatic scenic backdrop for the valley cities, and possess important wildlife, cultural resource, and recreational values. Among the treasures of the Santa Rosas and San Jacintos are dozens of palm oases including the largest native fan palm oasis in the country; waterfalls and riparian areas not expected in desert environment; an escarpment that rises abruptly from the desert floor near sea level to 10,800 feet and an arctic alpine environment atop San Jacinto Peak; an abundance of cultural sites, including village sites, Cahuilla ceremonial sites, and petroglyphs and pictographs; an abundance of wildlife, including the endangered peninsular bighorn sheep; and magnificent vistas.

Since the Conservancy's inception in 1990, we have worked closely with the Bureau of Land Management, local governments, and private sector interests on a cooperative partnership acquisition program to protect the mountains and provide for the public's enjoyment of them. The composition of the Conservancy's Governing Board both reflects and nurtures this partnership, as it includes representatives from the Coachella Valley cities, the County of Riverside, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, three federal agencies including the BLM, five state agencies, and three citizen members.

Designation of these mountains as a National Monument is a logical next step in the effort to protect this magnificent resource as a living legacy to future generations. The effort to establish a National Monument in these mountains is actually not a new one. The idea first arose in 1908 with a proposal for a Tahquitz Peak and Palm Canyon National Monument, but this proposal did not come to fruition. A National Park proposal surfaced in Congress in 1920, but failed because the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians did not support the bill, which centered on their lands, but about which they had not been consulted.

Many things have changed since 1920 and local, state, and federal interests have built a remarkable history of cooperation and partnership. One thing, of course, hasn't changed, and that is the magnificence of the mountains, and the importance of conserving that splendor for all time. Now, Congress has an opportunity to avail itself of the spirit of cooperation that has been developed in the Coachella Valley in order to accomplish the goal of conserving these storied mountains.

The Conservancy has been something of a catalyst for this effort, working with the Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management, Congresswoman Bono, the local cities, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, and development and conservation interests to develop a consensus of support for the establishment of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument.

HR 3676 has incorporated most of the proposals that were developed through this consensus building process in the Coachella Valley. We think the bill is 90% of the legislation that we think would achieve the

overriding purpose of protecting the resource values of the mountains while treating landowners fairly. We hope that the remaining 10% of important differences can be resolved and legislation enacted.

We have not seen the final map of the proposed boundaries, and would simply comment that we believe that the map should include all of the mountains from bottom to top, from toe-of-slope to the ridgeline. Along the toe-of-slope, this would entail using the existing boundary of the Santa Rosa Mountains National Scenic Area with a few minor exceptions where consensus has been developed locally to adjust the Scenic Area boundary to reflect the more accurate scale of mapping that has been accomplished since the designation of the Scenic Area and existing on the ground realities.

We also have concerns that some of the language in Section 5 may be construed to allow uses in the National Monument that are currently not allowed in the National Scenic Area or the Santa Rosa Mountains Wilderness Area. We think that the Section dealing with access and use issues should consistently make it clear that determinations about uses in the National Monument would be subject to all applicable laws and that proposals for uses would be addressed through the procedures already in place.

Similarly, there is some language in the bill that we think could have unintended consequences, such as preventing a land exchange between BLM and the University of California Natural Reserve System that would actually be net benefit for the National Monument. We are hopeful that changes can be made in the bill to address this and other unintended consequences.

We have provided Congresswoman Bono with a detailed analysis of the bill and suggested changes in a few areas that we believe are necessary to avoid unintended consequences, maintain the normal BLM and USFS processes for addressing use and access issues, and protect the treasure that is this mountain range, while not treating landowners unfairly. We think the bill will meet the test of fairness if its provisions enhance protection on federal lands while neither reducing nor enhancing the rights of non-federal landowners on their land.

The Conservancy's message to the Subcommittee is that we appreciate Congresswoman Bono's hard work toward establishing this National Monument, and we are hopeful that through the legislative process the few remaining issues can be resolved and a good National Monument law can be enacted. Successful National Monument legislation must build on and further the conservation partnership that has been forged in the Coachella Valley over many years. In its final form, HR 3676 must bring all the partners together: the Department of Interior, the, Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, the conservation groups, the development and business interests, and the state and local jurisdictions. If this collection of interests can successfully cooperate in the establishment of a National Monument, the valley communities as well as the nation as a whole will benefit greatly from protecting this spectacular mountain range.

California voters just passed two large bond measures, representing \$4 billion of investment in California's future. The bond measures will provide funds for parks, the protection of open space areas, flood control, watershed protection, and water quality and supply. A portion of those funds are earmarked for the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains, and the state is ready to work together with the federal government to help acquire and protect lands within the National Monument. This is an historic opportunity. Let us collectively seize it and get the job done.

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